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## Fresh gang violence in Rio despite pacification efforts

With less than a year to go until the 2016 Olympic Games, the urban pacification strategy being pursued by the authorities in the slums of Rio de Janeiro is being challenged by the renewed activities of organised criminal groups. Residents are increasingly concerned by the return of gunfights and a criminal presence in slums previously considered safe.

The strategy was first implemented in 2008 and significantly expanded after October 2009, when Rio was announced as the host city of the 2016 Olympics. It combines a heavily armed security presence, consisting mainly of the Military Police force (the main law-enforcement body in the city of Rio), and peacebuilding through the provision of public services, better transport links, sanitation and other public goods. An important change under the programme was the permanent presence of law-enforcement authorities in the slums: previously, the focus had been on raids – rapid police incursions into gang-controlled slums in armoured vehicles.

The city and its suburbs, with a total of 11 million inhabitants, have seen high levels of criminal violence since the 1970s. At that time, organised criminal groups used tactics similar to those of leftist guerrillas then active against the military regime, and funded themselves through rising revenues from narcotics.

Formed in the 1970s, Rio's oldest criminal organisation is the Red Command, which began to organise itself in a hierarchical way after having contact with left-wing guerrilla fighters in prison. Although some of the founders of the Red Command were reportedly aware of Marxist texts, their intentions were criminal from the start. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Red Command expanded as a result of its growing cocaine-trafficking activity and by basing itself in the slums of Rio, which were themselves expanding rapidly (urban growth has since decelerated). Rio's many hilltop slums, known as 'favelas', have since served as operational hubs for criminal groups with international connections.

### Gangs fight back

The pacification programme represented the first sustained attempt to expel criminal groups from Rio's slums and implement a permanent state presence within them, and

was initially credited as having achieved a significant improvement in stability and safety. However, the three main criminal groups are now striking back.

The Red Command, along with the Third Pure Command and the Friends of Friends, began in 2014 to challenge police forces by means of hit-and-run attacks and ambushes. Recently they have attempted to invade some slums by force.

As well as being the oldest faction, Red Command remains the most powerful. Police officers in Rio report that the group also has the fiercest appetite for taking territory. The usefulness of slums as operational bases was exemplified by a police raid of the Alemão e Penha favela that took place in 2010. Over the course of two days, officers seized weapons, drugs, vehicles and money worth around US\$26 million from Red Command members.

Although most favelas remain stable, larger and more densely populated communities are now experiencing attacks on a weekly basis. Of these, Alemão e Penha and Maré, which have populations of 58,000 and 64,000 respectively, are the most frequently targeted. In Maré, the three groups had previously acceded to a tense stalemate. But their members went into hiding after the arrival of military forces conducting pacification operations in April 2014 and launched the latest series of attacks. In response, local and federal authorities decided to keep the contingent of 3,300 army and navy personnel in place for six months longer than originally planned. The troops conducted law-enforcement operations between April 2014 and June 2015. An army soldier was killed in a sniper attack in late November 2014.

The number of police officers killed in areas with Pacifying Police Units (UPPs), bases installed in each slum area, increased from three in 2013 to eight in 2014. So far in 2015, nine officers have died.

The gangs' preferred tactic is the use of hit-and-run attacks, in which criminals open fire against police or military patrols and escape either on motorcycles or on foot amid the maze of narrow favela streets, many of which do not have names. But sometimes they go beyond that. In May, 50 heavily armed Red Command members invaded the Morro da Coroa slum in an attempt to retake territory from rivals belonging to Friends of Friends.

Eight people were killed in four days of clashes in an area that was under the command of an UPP and therefore officially 'pacified'. Episodes such as this have created an atmosphere of pessimism among inhabitants.

The violence is scaring away NGOs and sponsors spearheading social development projects that have been trumpeted as a central pillar of pacification efforts. For example, an education initiative that was helping 350 students in the Alemão complex in 2012 was later abandoned by its private sponsor. The number of students has reportedly fallen to 63 this year.

The delivery of public services, such as rubbish collections, sanitation, mail and legal electricity supplies, is also an important element of the programme. José Mariano Beltrame, security secretary in the Rio state government, who initiated the strategy in 2008, describes it in his autobiography as 'a logic to implode the power of drug trafficking by shaking its territorial structure'. The Brazilian flag is symbolically raised above each favela occupied by the security forces.

However, the slow arrival of institutions other than the police threatens this narrative and has attracted criticism from slum inhabitants. Beltrame himself has voiced irritation at the inadequate participation of other official bodies.

### Burden on police

The security forces face significant pressure on resources. With the initial success of the programme, local and federal authorities promoted pacification as the main security strategy to deal with criminality in Rio. But in order to maintain the security gains and prevent criminal gangs from merely shifting their activities to other areas, local authorities had to expand the programme aggressively in the lead-up to the Olympics. The number of UPPs more than doubled in four years, going from 18 favela areas in 2011 to 38 now. The number of Military Police officers deployed in pacified slums has increased fourfold since 2010, reaching over 9,500.

This expansion underlines the strain on security forces caused by policies that focus on reclaiming territory from gangs – a challenge facing several large cities across the developing world. As the programme has grown, the ratio of police officers to inhabitants in 'pacified'

favelas has had to be reduced sharply. Accurate numbers are hard to calculate, since definitions of the extent of the slums differ widely among the various studies of them. Research by sociologist Ignacio Cano based on 2010 numbers suggested that the rate then was 18 officers per 1,000 inhabitants. Current official numbers on the UPP website indicate that the rate is now about six per 1,000 inhabitants.

In June, the 3,300 navy and army troops completed their withdrawal from the Maré complex, citing constitutional impediments for the armed forces in carrying out a long-term law-enforcement mission. City authorities promised to replace them with 1,600 military police officers. However, only 400 officers were deployed to Maré after the military withdrawal, with plans to expand the standing force gradually.

The authorities are seeking to counter aggressive criminal tactics that resemble urban guerrilla warfare. Criminal groups in Alemão, for instance, have reportedly intimidated inhabitants into leaving their doors unlocked, making it easier for gang members to flee from the police after conducting hit-and-run attacks. Criminals are also increasingly recruiting boys to participate in attacks, with some suspects as young as 14.

These tactics add to the inherent complexity of Rio's favelas. The absence of state institutions, particularly the judiciary, slows down investigations. The density and complexity of Maré has limited security forces' presence to just a fraction of the territory – that bordering the highway connecting Rio's international airport to the affluent hotel and business areas. Highway traffic has been occasionally halted by gunfights.

### Contrasting approaches

To complicate matters, the growth in overall police numbers deployed to the slums has raised concerns about the quality of their training, as well as their human-rights record. The Military Police was created as a repressive force during the era of Portuguese colonisation and again served that role during Brazil's military regime, which ended in the 1980s. It has evolved into the authorities' primary tool in urban warfare, and is considered one of the world's most experienced forces in this field. Its personnel train Brazilian army units.

There is also growing evidence of a clash of cultures between the Military Police's paramilitary outlook, and the community stabilisation and engagement aims of the UPPs. With the civilian police restricted to investigations, Rio's only tool for law enforcement has a reputation as a lethal and brutal force. The Military Police's elite unit, which goes by the acronym BOPE, uses as its insignia a skull with a knife and two pistols going through it, over a black background. However, the Military Police chief of staff, Colonel Robson Rodrigues, told the IISS in an interview in April that his main challenge was to move the security structure from a militarised outlook into so-called 'proximity policing', of which the goal is for officers to enjoy the trust of communities and to use more human intelligence in the fight against criminal groups.

There is a long way to go before that is achieved. Scandals over alleged police involvement in disappearances and abuses have affected the reputation of the pacification programme. In August, Amnesty International released a [report](#) denouncing 1,500 deaths at the hands of officers in Rio de Janeiro during the past five

years and called the force 'trigger happy'. Amnesty said killings were often illegal, and were mostly of black young males. Beltrame called the report unfair, countering that pacified areas had seen an 85% reduction in the number of deaths caused by police officers. Rio's judicial authorities highlighted progress in investigating officers involved in alleged abuses, with the activities of 813 members of the Military Police having been formally scrutinised since 2013. Despite that, several protests have taken place throughout the city against the UPPs.

Despite mounting problems and dwindling resources the pacification programme is far from being abandoned. This is because statistics continue to show an improvement on the pre-UPP era: between 2008 and 2014, there was a 65% decline in the number of intentional homicides in slum areas that hosted pacification forces. Across the entire municipality of Rio, there were 42.5% fewer murders. While many favelas are still considered dangerous, many are far from being considered no-go areas, indicating significant progress.

Authorities in Rio de Janeiro face a dilemma: how to focus more on proximity policing while facing a situation that has been described by Beltrame as 'urban warfare' in some areas. He admits the limitations of his force, saying that not enough officers are being trained. The recent criminal attacks indicate that Rio faces highly organised and versatile armed groups, willing and able to challenge state authority directly. Local government authorities have pledged to keep resources flowing to maintain security policies. For local people, the important question is how this investment will be sustained in the long term, after the world's cameras have turned away from the Olympic Games.

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